

Whitman is Making the Right Decision

By

U.S. Rep. Maurice D. Hinchey (D-NY)

After a decade of studies and delays, it appears that the Environmental Protection Agency is moving forward with a plan to remove 100,000 pounds of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) from the Hudson River. This overdue decision is most welcome. Many people have worked for the last thirty years to make the Hudson cleaner. As a result, the river is healthier today than at any time in the last century. But because of PCB contamination, our beautiful river, which has a singular relationship to our nation's heritage and a tremendous amount of ecological and commercial value, has the unfortunate distinction of being the country's largest toxic waste site. Now, finally, this last serious insult to the integrity of the river can be removed.

Over a period of thirty years, General Electric dumped over one million pounds of PCBs directly into the river from its facilities in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward, NY. Every year five hundred pounds of PCBs flow over the Federal Dam in Troy, dispersing downriver and into the broader environment, harming New York and New Jersey's public health, economic growth, environmental quality, and recreational and cultural opportunities. EPA will use the same methods that have been successfully employed in other cleanups to improve the health of aquatic ecosystems by reducing contaminant levels in sediment and fish.

GE, in its relentless effort to evade responsibility for the contamination, has tried to convince us that it would be better to leave the PCBs where they are. If that were the case, then it certainly would be easier than what the EPA proposes. But GE's claim simply isn't true. After more than a decade of scientific investigation and analysis, including considerable governmental scrutiny and an extensive peer review process that provides the foundation for the agency's proposed cleanup plan, EPA has concluded that PCB-contaminated sediments are not being buried and will not stop adversely affecting public health unless they are physically removed from the river.

We know that PCBs threaten human health. People who regularly eat Hudson River fish face an estimated risk of cancer 1,000 times higher than EPA's goals for protection of public health and ten times greater than the highest risk allowed under the Superfund law. PCBs are also known to cause neurological, reproductive and endocrine disorders. The chemicals pose a special risk to the health of children.

PCB's have also damaged New York's economy. An estimated \$40 million annually has been lost since 1976 because of the closure of Hudson River commercial fisheries and restrictions on recreationally caught fish. Moreover, EPA estimates that 50 percent of the PCBs in the New York Harbor are GE PCBs from the upper river. These toxins significantly increase the costs of maintaining the harbor as an economically viable

port. Removing the PCBs will allow future navigational dredging to ensure that commercial craft will continue to ply the waters of the upper Hudson River.

PCBs threaten the integrity of numerous aquatic ecosystems and species of wildlife. A study conducted by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation released earlier this year found that PCBs have entered the food chain on land up to ten kilometers from the river. Another DEC study found hazardous-waste levels of PCBs in snapping turtles from the "hotspot" areas.

GE is the only remaining impediment to restoring the Hudson River to full health. It's time for GE to accept responsibility for its pollution and cooperate fully with the EPA plan, which is critical to reducing threats to people and wildlife, reviving local economies, reopening recreational opportunities and reinvigorating cultural ties along the river.